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# The Sensuous as Source of Demand: A Response to Jennifer McMahon's "Aesthetics of Perception"

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## Abstract

In this response paper I defend an alternative position to both Jennifer McMahon's neo-Kantian view on the aesthetics of perceptual experience, and the sense-data theory that she rightly repudiates. McMahon argues that sense perception is informed by concepts "all the way out," and that the empiricist notion of unmediated sensuous access to entities in the world is untenable. She further claims that art is demanding inasmuch as it compels one to engage in an open-ended, cognitive interpretive process with sensuous phenomena, and that it is this very process that opens up a space for critique of the entrenched representational concepts by which we navigate the world. In contrast, I argue that the sensuous itself is a source of demand. Perceptual objects, in virtue of their material constitution, are inexhaustible plexuses of meaning that demand a kind of sensuous, interpretive response on the part of our bodily posture and orientation. Works of art offer opportunities for critique insofar as they reveal dimensions of sensuous reality hitherto covered over by *status quo* conceptual distributions. McMahon is right that sensuous objects are never simply given. But, I claim, she is wrong to suggest that it is only by way of conceptual mediation that we make contact with the world. On the contrary, the sensuous self-presentation of things is always at the same time a demand on our sensory apparatus that resists encapsulation by concepts.

Jennifer McMahon offers a clear and compelling argument for a cognitive approach to critical artistic efficacy in particular and to perceptual experience more generally. Artworks, by means of pervasive conceptual schemes and the implication of spectators' past experiences, invoke indefinite reflection in ways of which neither ordinary discursive language nor the sensuous givenness of everyday objects are capable. She claims, in short, that artworks are *demanding*; inasmuch as they offer up no fully determinate meaning but at the same time betray a particular attitude or intention on the part of the artist, works of art

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demand the deployment of a more or less robust conceptual apparatus on the part of the spectator in order to render them unified and intelligible. Ordinary perceptual objects are similarly demanding, but lack the meta-level intentionality afforded in the artist's own cognitive orientation. The aesthetic, then, whether of works of art or of everyday sense perception, "involves concepts all the way out." This view, as McMahon points out, makes it difficult to ascribe to art a viable critical function because dominant, "reified" conceptual frameworks are precisely what effective works of art are supposed to expose to critique. She attempts to resolve this tension by drawing on Adorno and Habermas in a way that privileges "aesthetic form" as the conceptually communicable though non-discursive source of intelligibility in art without which the very notion of "critique" would be incoherent.

"Aesthetic form," it is true, plays an indispensable role in critical theory aesthetics, not only for Adorno and Habermas, but also for other figures of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse most notably.<sup>1</sup> However, it must be observed that what these thinkers have in mind with respect to "aesthetic form" is by no means straightforward and unequivocal, and cannot be easily consolidated into the well-known subjectivist picture of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment. Adequate aesthetic judgment, for Kant, purges from its regard all personal or private limitations, idiosyncratic preferences, and concerns with sensation; in short, adequate aesthetic judgment avoids in its deployment any and all materiality. One must abstract away these extraneous elements in order to arrive at a pure *a priori* judgment of form. With such a desiccated object left for aesthetic appraisal, it is hard to imagine *anyone* coming to disagreement over taste. But, those who fail at this process of abstraction are precisely those who must be banished from the *sensus communis* — not because their judgments fail to abide in a space of principles, but because they fail to be aesthetic at all. Now, if we trace the origin of the aesthetic back to its grounding in *aisthesis*, sense perception, this excommunication turns out to lay bare some rather sinister political implications.

For this reason both Adorno and Marcuse reject Kant's notion of "pure" form in favor of a dialectical one that includes materiality and particularity in its capacity for critical transformation. Aesthetic form, on this account, distinguishes itself from the reified categories of our day-to-day practical negotiations in virtue of its peculiar manner of self-presentation. Form is neither the conceptual illumination of intention (or appearance of intention), nor an abstract, universal shapeliness accessible only to (non-discursive) reason. Instead, form is the dialectical mode of presentation in which the "content" of one's ordinary experience is rendered strange and uncanny, and shown to be contingent. Such transformative presentation is possible only on the basis of a transcendent materiality from whose precognitive unfolding one must draw cues for adequate interpretation and response.

In what follows I will challenge McMahon's thesis by proposing a middle ground between what I take to be an unduly subjectivist cognitivism on the one hand, and the empiricist picture of discrete, raw sensuous givens on the other, which she rightly repudiates.

Art, in virtue of its formal being as *other* than what is, discloses what is by disrupting the hegemony of the actual. In other words, works of art reveal the contingent nature of what things are and how they're distributed, whether understood in terms of conceptual ordering or sensuous structuring, by way of a distinctive logic or manner of internal coherence. We need not, however, conclude from this that every perceptual experience of art is cognitively mediated, just as we need not posit the nature of perception in general as thoroughly mediated by concepts in order to escape certain empiricist pitfalls. As early as Aristotle (*De Anima* 426b), for example, we get the idea that *aisthesis* itself is a peculiar sort of *logos* that must be grasped on its own terms. That is, sense and sensible are really one to the extent that the latter directs the former if a concrete ratio (experience) is to be sustained. Proceeding in a Kantian trajectory, by contrast, McMahon uses pejorative language to describe the way in which human beings are sometimes presented as abiding in "raw" sensuous levels (e.g., "wallowing"). The demands made by art and everyday objects alike are always aimed at our conceptual faculties as *a priori* conditions for the possibility of meaning as such. McMahon is right to say, "the meaning of a particular artwork is not simply read off like a set of explicit instructions" (i.e., that meaning is not *given*), but can we not instead take this as evidence that *the sensuous as such is never simple*? The sensuous is, *ipso facto*, demanding, not of *a priori* conceptual categories, but of rich, precognitive, *praxical* responses, which always take their directives from sensible objects revealed in varying modes of self-presentation.

Walking through my house, I notice a small, waxy, spherical object that initially has the appearance of a chocolate malt ball. I can't recall the last time I've had chocolate malt balls, so the object calls for closer inspection. It turns out to be a red grape that must have rolled onto the floor while I was entertaining a couple nights before. How can I account for my perceptual error? I *did not* have a conceptually constituted mental representation of a chocolate malt ball that turned out to not coincide with its object out in the world. Rather, the grape *is* in such a way that its being includes the capacity to present itself as something resembling a chocolate malt ball at a certain distance from an observer, under certain lighting conditions, etc. There does not take place an inscrutable cognitive process in which I replace one set of concepts with a more adequate one. Instead, the grape demands that I adjust my bodily posture in order to greet it at a perceptual level more appropriate to its basic ontological structure. When I do so, the grape more clearly presents itself as what it is, though not perfectly. There are still dimensions of its reality that exceed both my sensuous awareness and whatever conceptual identity I happen to ascribe to it.

Perceptual objects are neither sensuously *given*, nor conceptually constituted. It is unfathomable that I have a “concept” of, say, an avocado. That I know what an avocado is upon seeing one is no evidence to the contrary. This merely shows that every sensuous encounter with a thing builds upon a sedimented history of such encounters in which, at various moments, one has been called to respond with a total bodily orientation to demands arising out of a thing’s self-presentation. Any concept I might deploy in an effort to sufficiently capture the avocado is shown to be hopelessly poor in the face of its deep synaesthetic complexity: the distinctive rough texture — unabstractable in experience from its deep green hue — of its outer casing gives way to a smooth, creamy, almost luminous light green flesh that exposes to one’s palate a virtual infinity of nuances inexhaustible by our conceptual vocabulary. Every object is an inexhaustible plexus of meaning whose infinitely diverse modes of self-presentation *order* perceptual responses in accordance with a rich internal normative structure that is never simply given.

The view I am advancing is quite compatible with McMahon’s very convincing claim about the ability of poetry (and, presumably, art in general) to frustrate the means-ends dynamics of everyday perceptual life. Most of the time, I relate to avocados much more prosaically than my above-description would suggest. In my day-to-day dealings, an avocado typically presents itself as a means to my end of savoring some wonderful avocado deliciousness. An effective still life painting of an avocado (imagine one done by Cezanne) can frustrate this largely obfuscating dynamic by disclosing dimensions of the fruit that withdraw from whatever instrumental purpose I otherwise set out for it. That is, art is capable of circumventing “the default position of our orientation” to things by revealing an inexhaustible reserve of sensuous meaning hidden beneath the surface of everyday practical life. An artist achieves this remarkable feat, it is true, by working the materials of her craft in accordance with a particular attitude or orientation. This is only possible, however, because she has already been ordered in a particular direction by the sensuous demands of the materials themselves.

The point I am defending can be made more concrete by reference to McMahon’s own treatment of Daniel von Sturmer’s experimental art. She points out that von Sturmer’s aesthetic experimentation with causal relationships “reveals objective facts to depend upon human interests and intention.” It strikes me that precisely the opposite is the case: such experiments reveal an excessive range of material possibility that resists subsumption to intentional means-end rationality. This non-conceptual product of artistic experimentation is also, I would argue, the principal source of art’s critical edge. Artworks show the incalculable range of subtle sensuous commands that always resist instrumental reason and conceptual encapsulation. Sensuous presentation is not immediately *given*, however, and we

never immediately “wallow” in it. Art can demonstrate for us the complexity of sensuous directives usually obscured by daily concerns and politically guided hierarchical distributions (e.g., *this* deserves more attention than *that*).

Let me say more about art’s powers of critique under the view I’m defending. McMahon articulates a serious tension endemic to her Neo-Kantian approach: If wild, sensuous nature is presumed to be the source of creativity from which new aesthetic forms are possible, and, if McMahon is correct, such a sensuous nature free from conceptual mediation remains an impossibility, where does this leave us with respect to creative originality? What is more, McMahon’s deployment of the “principle of aesthetic form” suggests that we are incorrigibly predisposed to read narrative order in the objects we experience, and that the range of such possible narrative configurations is always constrained by previous aesthetic norms and conceptual categories. The Kantian “genius” may self-prescribe his own rules of form, but if those rules are to be intelligible at all (and acceptable to communities of taste), they had better manage to rein in the wanton otherness of originaive sources in ways that, happily or not, result in maintaining the *status quo*. This problem is fruitfully transformed (not resolved), however, if we replace *diegesis* with *mimesis* as the operative mechanism in our account of aesthetic processes. If we think of the sensuous not as *having order* through conceptual mediation, but as *ordering* us by way of preconceptual, *presentative* (rather than representational) cues, then even the most revolutionary innovations in the world of art must be understood as in some sense imitative, that is, as coming about through a long, complex series of embodied responses to the material universe — simultaneously elusive and demanding — and its limitless possibilities.

I say the tension (between originality and obeisance or imitation) is not finally resolved because it becomes dialectical. “Copy” extends the being of “original” and discloses dimensions of the latter previously unseen. This is the true, non-dualistic nature of mimesis. Jacques Rancière, to my mind, brings out the aesthetico-political implications of this claim in his recent work on the “redistribution of the sensible.”<sup>2</sup> For Rancière, artworks have become more and more concerned with and expressive of the conceptually unmediated mundane in virtue of a deep, though politically problematized affinity between them. The routines and objects that make up everyday life are organized according to politically driven distributions of sensible phenomena, distributions that ensure the *status quo* in ways of seeing and acting. He defines the “distribution of the sensible” as:

the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.<sup>3</sup>

The primary upshot of this *a priori* distribution is a hierarchy of aesthetic values that has little to do with the sensuous self-presentation of experienced objects. A classic example of this political hierarchization is John Stuart Mill's uneasy integration of "quality" into Jeremy Bentham's woefully dicey "hedonic calculus." One's feeling of pleasure when experiencing an opera, for instance, is intrinsically qualitatively superior to that derived from, say, listening to a train pass in the night. This sort of qualitative superiority is, Mill claims, "an unquestionable fact" determinable by those "equally acquainted with ... both," who "do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties."<sup>4</sup> Environmental sensibilia, then, are parceled out and axiologically constrained by politico-cultural norms imposed from the outside by "experts."

The goal of both grassroots politics and the "aesthetic regime of art" are, for Rancière, the same: to disrupt the *status quo*, thereby opening up a space for the generation of new objects and new ways of relating to objects. In short, the common aim is a "re-distribution of the sensible," whereby something as banal as the sound of a train's nocturnal thrust, or the appearance of a rusty bottle cap disappearing into a patch of green grass, is allowed to become sensuously significant. The redistribution of the sensible opens up the possibility for a de-hierarchized diffusion of the human sensorium into the very heart of everyday phenomena. Works of art are paradigmatic of the profoundly diverse ways in which redistribution is possible. They are simultaneously examples of sensuous redistribution, and pedagogical implements for the divulgence of new, emancipatory ways of engaging the mundane sensuous world around us.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Herbert Marcuse (1978). *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière (2009). *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill (2003). *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis: Hackett, p. 101.